Unitarian Church of Montreal

Sunday Service: The Creative City

May 3, 2020

**Chalice Lighting**

Rev. Diane Rollert

“We Built This City on Rock ‘n’ Roll,” “New York, New York,” “I Left My Heart in San Francisco,” “City of Angels,” “I Love Paris,” “Running Back to Saskatoon,” “Demain matin, Montréal m’attend” “Je rends à Montréal”—at least fifty songs with the simple title “Montréal” or “Montreal,” written by artists as wide-ranging as Charlebois, Malajube, and Zappa. There are so many songs about cities—so much art and creative expression to be found, even on our deserted streets.

Today our worship service focuses on the work of urban advocate Jane Jacobs. In the early 1960s, she began to challenge North Americans to think about building cities on a human scale that respond to human needs. We light our chalice, symbol of our faith, the cup of knowledge and the flame of love, available to everyone. May this flame burn brightly for all we love about cities, past and present, and the creative ways we’re being called to reimagine them for the future.

**Dance Video**

Chloe Hart dances to “Strange Meadowlark” by Dave Brubeck

**Jane Jacobs and the Creative City**

Katherine Childs

Have you ever seen a path like this? A place where, despite the best efforts of city planners, people have made their own pathway through the urban landscape. When I was in university, one of my professors used to call these “Jane Jacobs paths.” To him, they were the ultimate example of what this important urban thinker was trying to say to the world.

Jane Jacobs was an influential urban activist and thinker and writer in the 1960s. She strongly opposed the residential movement towards the suburbs and really believed and fought for strong, vibrant, diverse communities within the urban centre, where people could live and also have their needs met with stores and a strong community life that was based on the sidewalk. Jane believed that the sidewalk was an integral part of the way that humans within the city could interact with each other, that the small interactions that take place if you're sharing a sidewalk with somebody—nodding to say hello, greeting their dog, whatever—that any of those things are part of what builds up our social fabric, and she was a strong proponent of maintaining urban neighborhoods, just like the one that I live in now.

So, one of the legacies of Jane Jacobs’s writing and her work has been the Jeans Walk. This weekend, all across the world, normally, people would be meeting up in groups to explore their neighbourhoods and learn new things about the places that they live. This year, those walks are taking place online, as people film their trajectories and share them with others. And so I am going to show you a little bit of my neighbourhood. And along with the rest of the members of the worship team, we'll be sharing some art that is to be found in the places where we live, as we celebrate the creative city this Sunday.

So, welcome to my neighbourhood of Pointe-Saint-Charles. On our street, right here, you can see pretty much exactly an encapsulation of this neighbourhood. On my right is an industrial building. There is a glass works and also a cardboard food packaging plant. On the left, you'll see some restored duplexes. These were once rental properties and are now, by and large, single-family homes. And, down at the end of the block, you can see new condominiums that were built in the last thirty years or so.

Part of the enduring legacy of Jane Jacobs’s work is really how we've come to understand that neighbourhoods where there is a mixed group of income levels, of different social classes, and of backgrounds are places that are really rich neighbourhoods. At the time that Jane was working and writing, there were people who strongly believed that these kinds of neighbourhoods—the kind that I live in, the kind of I love—were slums. They had dilapidated buildings, and they had poor people living in them, and Jane understood that those were things that made our neighbourhoods better, not worse.

As I come around the corner of this condo building here, you'll see one of the places that we can see creativity in my neighbourhood. This is a poem that was etched onto this building as it was built. And then now, as we come down to the end of the block, poetry again.

There's plenty to be critical of in Jane Jacobs’s work. Notably, she was notoriously dismissive of the role that race and racism play in urban planning and in urban design, and in how neighbourhoods are constructed, funded, and intended. But Jane Jacobs’s work is still important to me. One of her most influential pieces of writing is called “Downtown Is for People.” And as somebody who lives in a downtown neighbourhood, the idea that we can create neighbourhoods which are for people to live in—for people to walk and experience—is something that's really important to me.

So we have come to the end of my little neighbourhood tour. We're here on the corner of Centre Street and the beginning of the Atwater Tunnel, and we're looking at this piece of urban art. This piece is meant to illustrate the history of this neighbourhood, beginning with the trees at the bottom, transferring from being an industrial neighbourhood to the thing that it is today—a mixed industrial neighbourhood where people pass through, where there are bike paths, where there are parks, where there are businesses—and all of the things that make this community so wonderful and vibrant.

Thank you for coming on a walk with me!

**Song**

“Our World Is One World”

Eleuthera Diconca-Lippert

**Tagging**

Camellia Jahanshahi

Okay, so it’s way too loud outside for me to tell you what my favourite piece of city art is, but it's right here. It says, “The wild world itself is holy,” and I’ll tell you why it's my favourite in another segment, away from the traffic.

Hello. So now that I’m back inside and you can hear me, I just want to say one or two quick things about what I chose and why. So, the “what” that I chose was a tag. A tag is a type of street art that is usually just a name, or a catchphrase, or a logo, or just something very short and sweet and easy to write, because it is usually done in an anonymous fashion, very quickly. And I think that it is very cool, and the reason that I chose it is partially because I'm a big proponent of the street art movement, be it tags, or graffiti, or wheat pasting, or moss graffiti, or an abundance of other things that exist in the “artivist” guerrilla art world, but also because tags, specifically, are very cool because of how accessible they are. You know, as long as you have a thing to write on and a thing to write with, you can make art. And I think that is a beautiful notion to embrace, because it kind of pushes away rules of structure and allows for pure creativity and expression from the individual from an anonymous position in what is otherwise such a overwhelming and crowded place.

**Music and Images**

Creative Gestures from Humans and Nature

Sandra Hunt

**Share the Plate**

Shoshanna Green

Hi, bonjour. My name is Shoshanna Green, my pronouns are “she” and “her,” and I’m a member of the congregation at the Unitarian Church of Montreal.

In May, for our Share the Plate program, we’re donating to Communitas. Communitas helps people who are returning from prison to successfully reintegrate into the community in and around Montreal. They offer both services and support to ease each step of the process. At the heart of all their programming is the joint participation of volunteers with former and current prisoners. Together they use the principles of restorative justice to create a safer community by building relationships that help people face the challenges of reintegration.

They operate on a small budget; their fundraising goal for 2019 was only 18 thousand dollars, which they reached on the very last day of the year. Our contributions this month can make a significant difference.

If you can make a financial donation this month, please visit their website: communitasmontreal.org. And if you aren’t in a position to give money right now, know that you make a difference in all the other ways you support and strengthen our church community, our city, and our world.

Thank you for sharing your gifts.

**Reflection**

Caite Clark

Oh, hi! You might be wondering, “Caite, why are you walking at night?” Well, I think it’s actually—if it's safe—one of the nicest times to walk. For those of you who don't know, I—when I’m not an RE teacher—am a lighting designer. So from Monday to Saturday, I'm actually designing what lights look like in a theatre show. What I love about walking at night is we can see streetlamps—if you look right here [points across the street to a globe streetlight].

So, the beautiful thing about this neighbourhood is that the streetlamps are this gorgeous circular colour which makes everything feel warm and fuzzy. It reminds me of lamplighters in Mary Poppins. I don't know if anyone's seen that movie, but when lamps used to be lit with oil, they had this really nice, warm colour, and I think that's one of the reasons why our streetlamps are still this beautiful amber. If we wanted our streets to look really cold and dim, I would maybe use a blue light.

When I'm a lighting designer, I get to use these [fans through a sample-selection of coloured filters used in lighting]. These are called gels, and I can put them in front of lights and make them any colour I want. So if I wanted to recreate the colour of a streetlamp, it might look something like this [selects a light amber filter]. But I can just go for a walk and see them in real life!

**A Small-Town “Jane’s Walk”**

Rev. Diane Rollert

Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Boston, Montreal. I was born in a city and I've lived most of my life in cities, plus I’ve lived in a couple of suburbs, and now I'm living in the country. Our little town has a town hall on a back country road that overlooks farms and pastures, and there's no artwork there. The nearest town is down in the valley. It's small, but it has a few streets that tourists love.

Here, nature is the most creative artist, even after living things have died. And we have rocks—lots of rocks—that outline our gardens and our walkways. But there are signs of human creativity everywhere: things made out of rocks, the bricks laid in a beautiful circular pattern surrounded by benches where people usually sit and socialize, railings with ducks, fanciful ironwork with stars to decorate an alley of garbage cans, and metres of burlap that protect a stairway and passage down to a stream. We have our rainbows of hope too; this one's hanging in the window of the local gym. And there are murals that have been painted on once-blank walls. Three pines and Ruth’s duck (two clues to where I am), a colourful fence painted in stripes like a tropical cabana, and two horses behind the bench where I sat with visiting friends in the fall, now quiet and waiting for a time when we can squeeze in together again for a photo.

**Creativity in the City**

Eleuthera Diconca-Lippert

When we discussed doing a service on creativity in the city and what it meant to design cities for people instead of for cars, high-rises, concrete, etc., what came to me was the wild. Really integrating elements of the wild into urban landscapes as much as possible in the form of urban agriculture, community and collective gardens, personal gardens, parks—as much green as possible! And murals of the wild—as much artwork that reminds us of our wild home and our deep-down wild selves and of our elders, the trees and elements, and all the other animals and plants on this planet that can inspire us in beautiful ways.

So I wanted to share with you my favourite mural in NDG, my neighbourhood. Here it is. There's these beautiful old vines crawling all over it, which I absolutely love. And then these big trees. This is like a two- or three-storey building; that's how tall the tree is. I find trees deeply inspiring—their way of living in the world, being deeply rooted and reaching. Yeah, it's one of many things we can learn from them—how to both be connected to the terrestrial and reaching for the celestial, reaching for the skies.

And the song that came to me to share is about longing for the wild. I worked the land for many years, in the countryside on different farms across Canada, and then worked through Action Communitaire. I animated collective gardens in the city. So I really, really, really miss having my hands in the soil, and any element of that that's present in the city makes me a lot happier.

So here's a song that came to me. You can sing along if you feel like it. [*Eleuthera sings her song “I Miss.”*]

**City Meditation**

In Honour of Jane Jacobs

Rev. Diane Rollert

The landmarks of my life are lonely. In Cleveland's University Circle, Rodin's Thinker contemplates the cherry blossoms alone. In Chicago, Picasso's giant head of a woman stands silent in Daley Plaza. In New York, my cousin tells me, the streets I walked as a student have become a ghost town. A fearless girl confronts a charging bull near Wall Street: the duo in bronze are caught in a never-ending standoff, witnessed by no one. In Boston, the swan boats are surely idle, or tucked away in some winter storage space. In Manila, I wonder if the air-conditioned malls are empty—no more children playing in open spaces while their parents escape the heat. In Madrid, the paintings of Velasquez, Goya, and El Greco speak to each other across the empty, echoing halls of El Prado. In Venice, small fish glide in the undisturbed waters of the canals as birds dip towards their prey from out of clear skies.

In Montreal, the festivals have been canceled. Gone is the excitement of what surrounds you as you watch the stage: Stevie Wonder at the Jazz Fest, vendors carrying trays of beer above their heads, dancers on the stage, the audience on their feet cheering; or workers sitting on ledges of downtown sculptures, eating lunch; tam-tams on Mount Royal; and crowds lined along the wall of the Belvedère, taking selfies as they gaze past skyscrapers to the river and its bridges. Restaurants overflowing; inside, the windows thrown wide open to let in the cool air, while propane lanterns burn outside to chase away the chill. All these things gone for the moment. Quiet. Silent. Empty.

These are the cities of my life, the places I have lived and loved, the places I miss and longingly revisit in photographs. What will happen to our city lives of making art and music in the streets? All these things that may change. A future awaits us, calling for our creativity, a new way to live for many years as we wait for safety. If we have built beauty before—bridges, cathedrals, porticoes, and parks that have survived for generations—surely the city will survive this. When the crisis has passed, once life returns to some semblance of normal, may Jane's ghost remind us that cities can be glorious when we bring things down to their most accessible level, where everyone thrives.

Amen.

**Music**

“Prélude” by Alexandra Strélitski

Sandra Hunt

**Closing Words**

Interview with David Rollert

Rev. Diane Rollert

[*Rev. Diane and David sing a few lines of “We Built This City.”*]

Rev. Diane: So, David, I never knew you were a Jane Jacobs fan.

David: Yes.

Rev. Diane: I just learned this.

David: Yeah.

Rev. Diane: So what is it that you really love about Jane Jacobs?

David: Jane Jacobs is where one of my most deeply held beliefs comes from. What really matters in a city is the street life. Period. It doesn't matter how classy the architecture is, it doesn't matter any of that other stuff. It matters that there are people out, that people are moving around, that people are going out doing their shopping, they're walking to work, they're walking to walk, they’re going to cafés, they’re doing stuff. And that was what Jane Jacobs understood: that you need that diversity of uses and diversity of people, and that is what makes a city great. And when you don't have that, you can have the most beautiful, sleek architecture in the world, but the city will die.

Rev. Diane: And may we have a time that we can be back out on those wonderful streets!

David: Yes!

Rev. Diane: Thank you.

David: You’re welcome.

Rev. Diane: We extinguish our chalice with these words from Jane Jacobs: “There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city. People make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans.”

So may it be.

**Video: “Straight Lines” and Photo Montage**